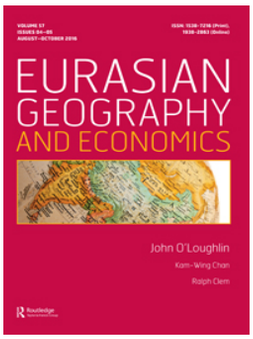

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Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have asked themselves if and for how long they should use the concept of "post-socialism." We review some ways in which post-socialism is no longer used productively and suggest that one way to analyze the enduring effects of socialism (a useful role for the concept of post-socialism) is by paying attention to how economic and political elites in Central and Eastern Europe continue to use the ghost of state-socialism as the ultimate boogeyman, disciplinary device, and "ideological antioxidant." We call this blend of post-1989 anti-communism and neoliberal hegemony "zombie socialism," and we argue that it is a key component of contemporary capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. We illustrate briefly some cases of zombie socialism, using data such as EU 28 statistics on labor, wages, work–life (im)balance, income tax, housing, and housing policies to show the effects of this hegemonic discourse. The presence of zombie socialism for almost three decades in Central and Eastern Europe made some of these countries "more" capitalist than countries with longer capitalist traditions in Europe. We join others who have suggested that there is nothing to transition any longer, as the "transition" is long over.

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Neoliberalism; post-socialism; social policy; housing policy; Central and Eastern Europe; inequalities

> For a quarter of a century we have condemned communism increasingly stronger. Five years from now we will probably fight it as Ceausescu [in the 1980s] was fighting the Fascism [of the 1930s] … At a more profound level, condemning real-existing communism has been perverted in condemning any social claim: Do you want a salary raise? You are communist. Do you want public services? Do you want to tax the rich and ease the burden on small producers and wage earners? You are a communist and you killed my grandparents. Do you want public transportation instead of highways? You are mega-communist and a retarded hipster. (Rogozanu 2014)

Introduction: socialism from post- to ghost

The quote above expresses in a nutshell a political and cultural process spreading in many Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies. A hybridization of ritualistic

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anti-communist incantations and a neoliberal doxa has shaped economic, political, and cultural dynamics of ex-socialist countries. In such instances, state-socialism resurfaces not as institutional, spatial, or mental "legacies" and "leftovers" of socialism, but as a "ghost," kept alive by the winners of the (now extinct) post-socialist period. In this article we ask: Who benefits from invoking state-socialism, in what contexts do such inflections occur, and with what effects? On a more general level, what role does the ghost of socialism play in the political economies and class dynamics of CEE countries? To understand the switch from "legacy" to ideological ingredient of neoliberalism in CEE, we introduce (and elaborate on below) the metaphor of "zombie socialism" to capture how keeping the socialist past alive in public discourse – almost three decades after its end – buttresses neoliberal politics and new configurations of inequalities.

During the last two decades, one key question that has underlined scholarship on ex-socialist countries across several disciplines has been to what extent post-socialism is still a relevant analytical category. After ascending as a denominator of all things post-1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, several scholars in geography, anthropology, and sociology have pointed out that the concept of post-socialism has become less relevant (Boyer and Yurchak 2008; Cervinkova 2012; Chari and Verdery 2009; Dunn and Verdery 2015; Ferenčuhová 2016; Hirt 2013; Horvat and Štiks 2012; Humphrey 2001; Pickles 2010; Rogers 2010; Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008; Tuvikene 2016; Wiest 2012). Against this backdrop, we indicate one location where one may find continued relevance of socialism (and its "post"). Socialism – as a zombie and ghost – is important in the production of neoliberal monoglossia and guilt by association for those who challenge the dominant wisdom of trickle-down economics, thus supporting the worldview and, ultimately, the interests of the winners of post-1990 transition.

To evidence the works of zombie socialism, we start with a section where we review the main critiques of the concept of post-socialism. In the same section, we present case studies of zombie socialist political discourses from Hungary and Romania, as an entry into elaborating on this metaphor. We then discuss the effects of zombie socialism in several social policy domains and the actual conditions of life of post-socialist societies. We use national-level macroeconomic indicators; wages to GDP ratio, the share of minimum wages to all jobs, work–life imbalance, social spending and taxation, and housing statistics. We develop our discussion of housing markets and policies in greater detail to drive the point that zombie socialism can inspire policies that effectively jettison an entire area of social policy, ignoring growing problems experienced by different social groups such as the poor, the young, and the elderly, and contributing to social dumping. The data do not systematically focus on city/metropolitan regions, but rather provide a broad overview of socioeconomic and ideological factors that underpin local developments.

Three caveats are necessary. First, we are aware that in constructing a master narrative for the entire region we erase important national and especially sub-national

dynamics, but there are enough arguments to support the idea that the processes that we outline in this article are present at different scales for much of the post-1990 historical cycle. Second, our argument is most likely limited to Central and Eastern Europe, rather than being applicable to the former Soviet Union (FSU). Socialism still carries – increasingly – positive connotations in parts of the FSU, where the zombie may come alive in some new form, as is the case, for example, in the "Donetsk People's Republic." As countries in the region follow different paths, both in terms of policy orientations and economic developments, the role that socialism plays in the collective imaginaries of these post-socialist societies may diverge as well. Third, we cannot substantiate the conscious character of the decision of politicians to invoke state-socialism when promoting neoliberal measures, and increased social dumping. We can indicate, however, instances where the two go together, a situation indicative of how "zombie socialism" is a form of symbolic domination of the hegemonic groups in CEE societies (Burawoy 2012). Zombie socialism may be employed in different ways for different aims. It may work as a means of gaining support for certain policies and budgetary allocations, as a justification for pragmatic decisions, but also as a way of framing policy priorities and ignoring certain claims in favor of others.

Zombie socialism: ghostly state-socialism after the end of "transition"

In order to spell out what zombie socialism is and how it works, we begin this section by situating our arguments in the sizeable literature on post-socialism and focusing our attention on some renewed analytic strategies for approaching socialism and post-socialism. We then offer several examples of zombie socialism, most notably focusing on two particularly relevant vignettes, one from the early 2000s (Hungary) and another one from 2014 (Romania).

Some scholars have emphasized that "post-socialism" is no longer a spatial container. Ex-socialist countries have experienced diverging economic trajectories. The conventional geographic knowledge used for locating the socialist countries has undergone transformations (Bunce 1999; Humphrey 2001; Pickles 2010, 134; Rogers 2010). Before the 2008–2009 global financial crisis (GFC) literature classified countries according to "varieties of capitalism" (champions, slackers, corporatist, neoliberal, etc.) and distributed them across elastic symbolic geographies (i.e. Central/Eastern/former Soviet/Baltic/Southern; see Bohle and Greskovits 2007; Pickles 2010, 134; Swain 2011). Diverging economic evolutions during the GFC made internal heterogeneity an even more salient issue. To give just one example, housing markets across the region, and indeed across Europe, have become more heterogeneous (Pittini et al. 2016). Though in all post-socialist countries nominal housing price indices have decreased compared to the pre-crisis period, in countries such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic, decreases have been relatively small, while in Estonia, Romania, and Bulgaria housing price indices nearly halved in the 2009–2014 period (EMF 2015), mirroring different responses to the crisis

(Bohle 2014). At an urban scale, Hirt (2013) has argued that one may not conceptualize the existence of a "post-socialist city" the way urban scholars spoke of the "socialist city." Major features of the socialist city – such as high urban core density and an absence of low-density rings, state ownership of urban land, prominent presence of heavy industry, and reduced variety of design – are no longer there.

Aside from becoming a weaker spatial container, post-socialism has also ceased to be a temporal container or recognizable condition (Boyer and Yurchak 2008; Dunn and Verdery 2015; Ferenčuhová 2016; Horvat and Štiks 2012; Humphrey 2001; Rogers 2010; Tuvikene 2016). Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Katherine Verdery – two scholars closely associated with the ascent of the concept of post-socialism – observed recently that "after all, no one now refers to western Europe as 'post-feudal'" (Dunn and Verdery 2015, 1). Most countries have institutionally reached what Francis Fukuyama (1992, xii) saw at the beginning of post-socialism as the end of history; that is, "a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings." The great expectations of the early 1990s elites in post-socialist countries have been fulfilled: they are recognized by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union (EU), and the United States as liberal democracies and "functional" market economies. Most countries have become EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members. Despite perpetual calls for reform and "the rhetoric of incompleteness," the region is fully capitalist, providing a pool of cheap and educated labor close to the core of the EU (Horvat and Štiks 2012, 39). As Horvat and Štiks (2012) put it, "in this respect, the Transition as such is long over. There is nothing to 'transit' to anymore." Additionally, as Caroline Humphrey (2001, 13) noticed, the generations brought up under socialist regimes have disappeared, or are at best, retired from the political and economic scene (see also, Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 329). People who were still relatively young at the time of the 1989 transformations are now, themselves, fast approaching retirement age.

In addition to being a weaker spatial and temporal container, scholars have indicated additional issues. They include the lack of comparison and the overemphasis on processes coming to the CEE region, rather than moving out of the region (Rogers 2010; Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 313; Wiest 2012). Rogers (2010, 3) has pointed that it is not enough to understand how "various post-socialist contexts serve as sites for debate about how transnational or global processes (from democratization to neoliberalization to religious conversion) have *come to* the former Soviet bloc." Rogers goes on to suggest that "just as significant … are other sites, more complex circulations, and understudied vectors of transnational movement that are not bound by the world regions bequeathed to us by Cold War configurations of knowledge and power." Similarly, echoing insights from comparative urbanism (Robinson 2010; Wiest 2012), Rogers warned against obsessive and implicit comparisons with Western experiences, encouraging scholars to bring to the fore the global interconnectedness (and subordination) of post-socialist cities.

Against this backdrop, some studies have offered renewed ways for rethinking time and space in relation to socialism and post-socialism. Seeking to "liberate the

Cold War from the ghetto of Soviet area studies" and to enter into a dialog with postcolonial scholarship, Katherine Verdery (2001, 20) urged scholars to identify the enduring effects of cold war tectonics, proposing the analytics of "post-Cold War studies." According to Verdery, this would allow a different perspective on the twentieth century by situating socialism and post-socialism, like post-colonialism, *globally*, as "the effects of the Cold War were not confined to any single world area[,] but … wholly pervasive throughout most of the twentieth century" (21; see also, Chari and Verdery 2009; Dunn and Verdery 2015; Pitcher and Askew 2006; Rogers 2010). Interesting empirical research, ethnographic and historical, has emerged recently, such as the German Democratic Republic's housing construction in Vinh City, Vietnam, as part of "international solidarity" between socialist countries (Schwenkel 2015) and the schooling of students from African countries in Romanian universities (Gheorghiu and Netedu 2015).

Finally, some other studies have enriched our understanding of post-socialism by gazing above and below ground, to the vertical and material dimensions of post-socialism, enlarging the understanding of transition by incorporating the sociotechnical dimensions of cities. Above ground, Gentile (2015, 583) documented the importance and neglect of vertical segregation of socialist-era housing, calling for "increased sensitivity towards the third dimension of space in contemporary urbanism." Beneath-ground, Rogers (2014) outlined the "energopolitics" dimension of transition, while Bouzarovski, Bradshaw, and Wochnik (2015) discussed how different from the conventional symbolic geographies Europe looks beneath ground, from the point of view of pipes and gas flows.

In this contribution, we point to a different analytic venue, centered on the strategic essentialization of socialism, not by the subalterns of post-socialist societies, but by the winners of transition. Although the socialist and post-socialist institutional heritage has become, after almost 30 years, extinct, and although the actually existing socialism fades quickly into the deep history of the present, the vivid resurrection of the socialist past is part of the hegemony that furthers neoliberalism and disciplines the population of such countries. Thus, instead of imagining capitalism as being built "on and with the ruins of communist system" (Smith and Pickles 1998, 2), one may argue that post-socialist capitalism has been built by the winners of transition using the "ghost" of communism in order to discipline the workforce into giving up social justice claims (Poenaru 2013; Simonica 2012). Simonica (2012, iii) argues that in Central and Eastern Europe "capitalism is not only built with the ruins [of socialism], but also by keeping its ghost alive." As a zombie, the actual and imagined socialist past functions as an "ideological antioxidant" (Žižek 2001). For Slavoj Žižek, ideological antioxidants are arguments, usually coming from pro-business corners, holding that "any radical emancipatory political project necessarily ends up in some version of totalitarian domination and control" (5). In much of the post-1989 historical cycle, the specter of the communist period acts as the "ultimate bogey" for pre-empting social claims. Any attempt to

challenge post-socialist neoliberalism is, as in other cases, "denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of 'totalitarianism'" (4).

We do not use the metaphor of the zombie to suggest that socialism lingers and creeps in to take over the region once more or indeed the capitalist world, as some market fundamentalists suggest (see, for instance, Marsland 2004). Indeed, zombie metaphors are sometimes used to suggest that an outdated idea returns to haunt the present and seize the future (hence "zombie neoliberalism," "zombie politics," "zombie economics," "zombie capitalism"; see Giroux 2011; Quiggin 2010; Peck 2010). Nor do we use it to suggest the rise in CEE of occult economies, although there is an abundance of conspiracy theories and fascination with occult explanations of political developments (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Similarly, we do not use the idea of the zombie along the lines of the work of mourning for the millions of victims who perished during the Stalinist regimes as outlined by Etkind (2009). Rather we seek to explore why the winners of transition still need socialism, instead of letting it go. Like the *bokor* (zombie master) in the classic movie *White Zombie* (1932, director Victor Halperin), such winners seek to produce docile subjects by dismissing social claims voiced by the "losers" of transition as being communist, outdated, anti-democratic, anti-meritocratic, unsustainable, regressive, covertly totalitarian, or at best, naive. Zombie socialism has had since the early 1990s – with different intensities in different historical moments in each country – constitutive capacities for the allocation of wealth, social dumping, and the reduction of support for redistributive policies. Despite its temporal and geographic variation, it tended to occupy a central place in the entire post-socialist period and it has represented the local flavor of post-socialist neoliberalism.

We thus focus less on the rescaling and analytic portability of the concept of post-socialism, but rather revisit some major themes of class and inequalities in post-socialist societies (Dunn 2004; Dunn and Verdery 2015; Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998). In so doing, we reinforce Rogers (2010, 15) methodological point that in ex-socialist countries the study of contemporary capitalism should proceed "through the study of post-socialisms, rather than abandoning it for a generalized neoliberalism" (see also, Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008), as well as Brenner and Theodore's (2002, 349) suggestion that "an adequate understanding of actually existing neoliberalism must therefore explore path-dependent, contextually specific interactions between regulatory landscapes and emergent neoliberalism."

Let us present some examples of zombie socialism. One illustrative vignette of zombie socialism is the first term in power of the FIDESZ political party in the late 1990s and early 2000s Hungary (Gergo Pulay, personal communication).[1] FIDESZ ideologues pushed for the reimagining of the Hungarian polity on the opposition between a republic of bourgeois citizens and the *panelproli* – "proletarians from the Communist apartment buildings"; that is, the inhabitants of concrete, prefabricated socialist-era high-rise apartment buildings. Zsolt Bayer – an opinion leader and publicist of *Magyar Hírlap,* co-founder of FIDESZ, and friend of current Prime Minister Victor Orban – emphatically stated in 2002 that "Hungary is not going to

allow the lumpenproletariats of the waterheaded [i.e. overcentralized] Budapest, and within that Pest, to decide what should happen to this country." Replacing the socialist-era term worker (*munkás*), "panelproli" came to denote "middle class" constituencies, the former socialist working class and its remnants. Its usage was often intermixed with the equally depreciative term "lumpen"; that is, the mass of the uneducated and uninformed in the Hungarian context of the early 2000s (Halmai 2011, 129). The reference to Pest as opposed to Buda also connotes the working class or at best "petty-bourgeoisie," opposed to the "middle class" or "historically noble" zone in Buda. These were strictly symbolic class geographies, since the actual social map of Budapest is significantly more complex. The link between the "panelproli" and Pest (and not Buda) is due to the historically developed working-class quarters of Pest such as Csepel or Angyalföld, even if these were not strictly communist-built industrial quarters (existing since the late nineteenth century onward). This example is particularly telling since even if Hungary has been a "champion" of a transition to capitalism in the first decade of the 1990s, its political and economic elites reinserted socialism as part of the foundation of that type of political scene.

A second case study example of zombie socialism is in the housing vision of the ex-Romanian President Traian Basescu.[2] Toward the end of his second mandate (2010–2014), marked by austerity programs, political turmoil, anti-trade union legislation, and labor flexibility policies, he declared at a meeting,

> Watch American movies and notice the way they pack up three suitcases and leave home because they have not found a well paid job … I would not like to see you educated in the spirit of "I want to own a home", but rather "I want a job and a salary first." … I do not want to suggest that one does not need a home. One does, but you should be pragmatic, not sentimental. We are left with this home [ownership] thing from the communists.[3] To own a house. But back then, the job was offered where you had the house. But life in a free economy, a free society means competition and competition pushes people to be mobile. (Mediafax 2014)

He reinforced this moral and economic negative view of homeownership in another statement saying that "the lack of mobility is first and foremost generated by the way we were raised to own homes and when you lose your job you sit in your house and you consume your poverty." The only chance to see increased mobility, according to him, was to see the minimum wage increase, rather than see wages increase above minimum wage (InCont.ro 2014).

This statement is particularly meaningful because it crystallizes several layers of violence. First, it casts the only significant form of wealth that Romanians have – and indeed other people living in super-homeownership societies – as idle and non-productive. Second, it disregards that for people across Europe "a significant preference for homeownership is reported, and renting suffers from an image as an inferior, temporary form of tenure" (Pittini et al. 2016, 26). Approximately 70% of Europeans are currently homeowners, and about 40% own without a mortgage. Third, the ex-president's take on housing represents the viewpoint of employers,

many low wage-paying industrial producers coming from Western Europe, and human resource companies, who cast super-homeownership as a bad "housing fix." Employers in Romania complain that people are immobile because they own housing, ignoring the fact that about one-third of wages are minimum wages, thus making it impossible to pay market rent if people move out of their homes. Pro-business and fiscal conservative voices have often rehearsed this theme. Theodor Stolojan, a former prime minister and architect of neoliberal policies explained at a libertarian think-tank meeting that "We [have] a rigid housing market … which does not help at all … labor market flexibility."[4] A labor legislation specialist explained the lack of labor mobility by the fact that geographic mobility inside a company "resembles in some respects the mandatory jobs assignments at the end of college practiced during the Communist period," in addition to the problem of homeownership (BusinessMagazin 2007). A human resources consultant explained that Western Europe has much fewer homeowners than Romania and that there people are used to living their entire life renting, thus moving much more easily (2007). These last arguments disregard the fact that there is no link between homeownership and economic growth. China's homeownership rate is 90%, while in Singapore, another country with sustained growth and strong neoliberal, developmentalist state, 80% of the housing stock is provided under the public homeownership program (Chua 2000, 2011). Furthermore, one key difference between homeownership-oriented housing systems in CEE and more rental-oriented systems in Germany, Austria, or France is the strict enforcement of rent capping and rent regulations on the private renting sector, which enables renters to have security of tenure (staying longer in their rented homes, as opposed to moving more easily).

There is no shortage of zombie socialism arguments. Another example of putting zombie socialism to work is the link business elites draw between a communist-era lack of work ethic and reduced productivity with the lack of justification – indeed, the impossibility – of wage increases. On the grounds of "productivity," a public high school teacher in East Berlin is paid 85% of what the same teacher is paid in West Berlin for the same amount work.[5] The cause of Melania Trump's plagiarism of Michelle Obama's speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, according to a political scientist born in Poland and currently teaching in the U.S., is "the culture of cheating in Eastern European schools inherited from state-socialism" (Nalepa 2016).[6] Forms of moral consumption and liberal politics are often treated as communist-era impositions on freedom of choice. In Poland, women's rights (abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, civil unions, teaching of sex education) are an apocalyptic threat for the Catholic Church – an institution feared by Polish politicians – prompting a bishop to state that the "ideology of gender presents a threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined." (Sierakowski 2014) Attempts to practice non-racist language are treated as "political correctness," which, along with multiculturalism, represent no less than "American Communism" for one influent self-proclaimed cultural and fiscal conservative in Romania. For

the same public figure, even the disregard of speed limits in traffic is due to the communist-era double-speak and culture of informality (Patapievici 2014).

Zombie socialism, class dynamics, and neoliberal social policies in Central and Eastern Europe

Taking into account such forced associations between the extinct socialist period and social justice agendas that might slow down or alleviate the fate of the losers of transition, it should come as little surprise that, as Ger Duijzings (2010, 109) put it, "some of the features of neoliberalism have taken their purest form in Eastern Europe" (see also, Smith and Rachovská 2007, 1163). The post-socialist neoliberalism has been particularly good at exploiting labor and passing on the cost of reproduction of labor (housing, social expenditures) from capital to labor. In this section, we describe some of the effects of zombie socialism in three areas: the glorification of the "middle classes"; labor and taxation policies; and especially, housing. We look at housing in greater detail, because the privatization of housing under post-socialism can be seen as the most comprehensive retreat from a domain of public policy engaged in by governments in the CEE region. The continuous discounting of housing as an area of government intervention and as a vector for the delivery of social services makes housing policy a telling example of zombie socialist social dumping.

Glorification of the "middle classes"

Many cases of zombie socialism, including some that we outlined above, share Janus-faced tropes: the glorification of the middle class as a rupture with the communist past and the attack on the welfare system and the poor as a vestige of the same socialist past and arrested development. One political process present in many countries across the region is that the winners of the transition from socialism advocate the concentration of public spending on the middle class (i.e. themselves), while simultaneously trying to disconnect the rest of society from public budget spending. As Ost (2015, 614) put it, the "middle class"[7] as a concept is "breathtakingly vague," but the media and politicians in the CEE region generally refer to it as the employees of multinational companies, the creative class, the educated urbanites, established businessmen, and aspiring "entrepreneurs," but also top public employees. In Russia for instance, there is an "excessive fascination with the middle class … as the dominant class of the future, one that would be the carrier of the new values of democracy and a market society" (Crowley 2015, 701). Poland saw significant discussions of who the not-yet-existing middle classes ought to be after the fall of communism (the nomenklatura? the diaspora? the skilled service sector?), rather than what happens to the non-"middle-classes" (Ost 2015, 610–614; see also, Boyadjieva and Kabakchieva 2015, 629 for Bulgaria; Makovicky 2014).

The implicit and often explicit message of such glorifications is that the state should cater to those successful in the market, rather than those at the margins of society. According to this meta-narrative which seems to be shared across the region, the state should reform, discipline, and especially put to work the lower classes. The lower classes are market failures because – so the narrative goes – of the survival of socialism in their minds, in public institutions, and policies. Thus, they need to be purged of non-market behaviors such as dependence on government assistance (Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998, 12). Often times the cult of the middle class accompanies derogatory remarks to lower classes, amounting to "postsocialist Eastern Europe's own variant of Orientalism," as Elizabeth Dunn (2004, 92) put it. Such working class bashing is frequent in the current Romanian discourse that contrasts young people who work in the skilled service sector to the uncultured and "uncivilized" working class, but also to elderly political constituencies, constantly accused of "bolshevik" temptations. Similarly, in Poland, the "middle class" – supposedly belittled by socialism – is now threatened by the poor. The imagined middle class, composed of "emerging property owners, professionals, and 'knowledge workers' distinguished by their interest in high culture, knowledge of foreign languages, a broad way of thinking, and positive work ethos ('not just doing one's job and going home')" – has the ability to save Poland from "civilization incompetence" and from the inability of the lower classes who are accused that they "drink, fight, rely on public assistance and spend their lives watching TV" (Ost 2015, 615; see also, Fleming 2012).

Zombie socialism in labor and taxation policies

As of 2013, the share of wages to GDP was lower than the EU 28 average in all post-socialist countries excepting Slovenia, which was the highest in the EU (Figure 1). Whereas, the EU 28 average of the percentage of GDP that goes to labor is 56%, post-socialist countries vary between 43.9% in Slovakia, 44.6% in Lithuania, 45.8% in Romania, 47.8% in Poland, 48.6% in the Czech Republic, and 54.0% in Bulgaria (see Figure 1). This is indicative of a situation of a weaker negotiation power of the labor force relative to capital.

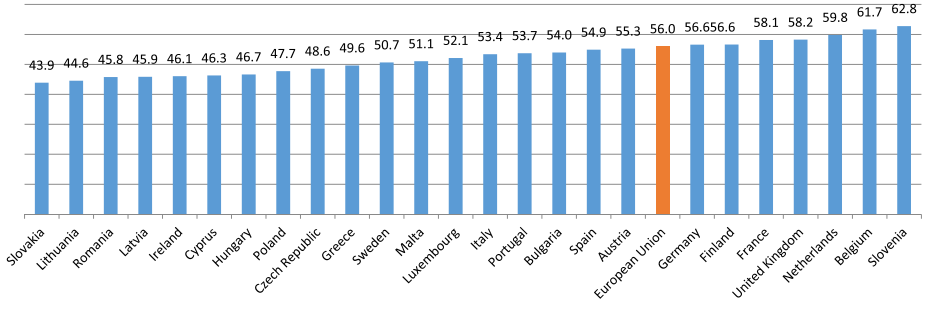

Figure 1. Share of wages to GDP in EU countries in 2013 (adjusted wage share to total economy as percentage). Source: European Commission (https://knoema.com/ECAMECODB2016/annual-macro-economic-database-2016).

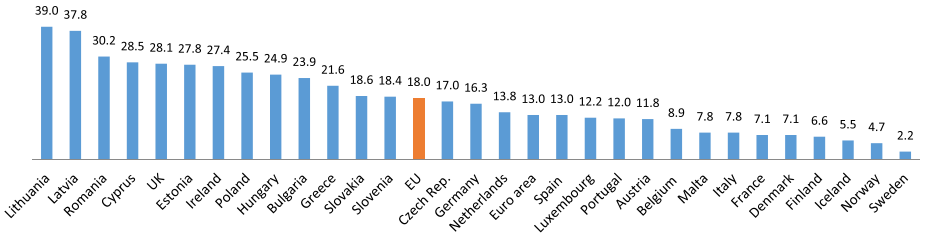

Figure 2. The share of people earning less than two-thirds of the national median gross hourly earnings in EU countries in 2010. Source: Eurostat (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gdp-and-beyond/quality-of-life/low-wage-earners3).

The winners of transition have been particularly efficient at forcing down the price paid for labor and appropriate higher shares of the surplus for capital. In all former socialist countries (except the Czech Republic), the percentage of people earning less than two-thirds of the national median gross hourly earnings is above the EU average, which is 18%. Save for Cyprus, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, all of the 12 countries where 20% or more of the labor force is paid the minimum wage are post-socialist. In Lithuania, low-wage earners amount to no less than 39% Figure 2.

With the exception of three countries, all post-socialist EU member countries spend significantly less on social protection (as a percentage of GDP) than Western European countries. Expenditure on social protection in post-socialist countries is substantially lower than in the countries with a longer and deeper capitalist history. The EU28 average spending on social protection is 19.5% of GDP. Save for Slovakia (20%), countries like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania spend as little as 11.4% (Romania) and 13.4% (Bulgaria). Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia spend slightly more (15.6–18%), but still below the European average (Eurostat 2016).

Under such circumstances it should also come as little surprise that the imposition of the cost for the reproduction of labor on households creates particular tensions in the work–life balance. Many post-socialist countries are quite similar in their location relative to the rest of the European Union. There is clear evidence in European statistics that post-socialist employees work longer hours than the rest of Europeans (Chelcea 2015, 348–350). This is visible in the number of people who work more than 40 h/week, during weekends, and 48 + hours/week: 12 of the 16 countries where people work more than the EU average are post-socialist (348–350). Accordingly, a significant percentage of the population of post-socialist countries experience issues of work-life imbalance. One report found that the "disruption of work-life balance at both home and work is especially a problem in some central and east European countries." (Eurofound 2012, 63). Whereas, "only" 40–50% of the population experiences conflicts at work and/or home in the Netherlands, Italy, or Denmark, the figures vary between 63 and 73% for Latvia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary (2012, 65). Only Slovenia, Slovakia, and Lithuania are beneath the EU28 average (57%).

Other tangible effects are the evacuation of the social justice agenda from the social democratic parties in the region and the emergence of a neoliberal consensus, punctuated occasionally by ecologist movements, geopolitical disruptions, or nationalist overtones, as is the case in Hungary and recently, Poland (Vesalon and Cretan 2015). Most social democratic parties that were, in theory, supposed to stand for the losers of transition have adopted Tony Blair's "Third Way." As one scholar put it,

> the weakness of left parties in Central and Eastern Europe is less visible in their electoral support than it is in their intellectual support. After decades of intellectual hegemony, left ideas literally vanished in the region, leaving neoliberalism to rule as the only game in town. (Dragoman 2015, 229)

Some social democratic leaders became fervent pro-business champions in order to disassociate themselves from the communist past. The 2012–2015 Romanian social democrat prime minister, Victor Ponta, described himself as "the most pro-business Prime Minister in Europe," while simultaneously spending substantial efforts to avoid any association with leftist politics and over-performing the rejection of communism.[8] The reformed communists of the Social Democratic Party in Croatia "became the party most associated with neoliberalism and closing the integration into EU" (Grdešić 2015, 665).

Finally, another tangible effect of zombie socialism is the adoption across the entire region of flat income tax regimes in the 2000s (1994 in Estonia). Except for the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which repealed their flat-tax legislation in 2012, all countries currently tax according to this libertarian creed. As one commentator put it, the "many countries [in the region] trumpeted their flat-tax regimes as a symbol of their transition to a market economy and their openness to investment" (Bloomberg 2013), with Macedonia lowering it to 10% for both corporate and income tax purposes (KPMG 2015). Neoconservative circles in the West, such as the Cato Institute in the U.S., acclaimed it enthusiastically (Bloomberg 2013). Worthy of an illustration of Foucault's idea of the "boomerang effect"[9] ([1975–1976] 2003), one laudatory study by two U.S. professors of economics explained that,

> [The flat tax in ex-socialist countries] goes beyond the current definition of what the standard package of feasible economic reform policy ideas is supposed to contain. It is not an attempt to "catch-up" with the richer Western economies, but actually a means to "get ahead" using cutting-edge free-market ideas. It is the former communist countries that seem to be leading the way in liberal, free-market economic reforms. We see Western academics travelling to Eastern Europe not to teach, but to learn. (Aligică and Evans 2009, 184)

As one may notice from the data above, social claims for redistribution have been expelled or, at the very least, marginalized in most policies regarding labor, work–life balance, social protection, and taxation in CEE countries. We turn next to housing in greater detail, because the privatization of housing under post-socialism can be seen as the most comprehensive retreat by governments in the region from a domain of public policy.

Zombie socialism and housing policies

The one measure that defined the transition from socialism and had the longest lasting effects on urban built environments has been the privatization of state-owned housing and the creation of (super) homeownership societies in Central and Eastern Europe. Two and one-half decades after this political measure, collective ideologies that might guide housing policies are still largely absent in CEE countries (Stephens, Lux, and Sunega 2015). When policy measures are implemented they usually reflect knee-jerk reactions to outside pressures, such as the requirements of EU accession or the pressure of the GFC. Tenure structures still distinguish former socialist countries from Northern and Western European ones, but also from Southern European ones. The clearest distinction is the very high rate of outright ownership of housing – tending toward 80%, and (with the exception of Hungary) very low rates of mortgage uptake – as low as 2 or 3% in Romania and Bulgaria (EQLS 2012). After the devolution of housing responsibilities to local governments and the rapid privatization in the early 1990s, a historical cycle of disinvestment and moral abandonment of housing by governments began. At least, during the 1990s, the governments in the region equated homeownership with the absence of housing problems. Although many governments in Europe have promoted homeownership since the 1980s as the overarching goal of housing policy, in the case of CEE the reason might have been more related to a virtual "policy collapse" (Pichler-Milanovich 2010) in which the role of the state was much reduced.

Following the 2000s, governments in the CEE region began to recognize housing as a structural problem affecting particularly the younger cohorts that had not benefitted from giveaway privatization and were finding it increasingly difficult to launch housing careers outside parental homes (Roberts 2003). In countries like Romania, for example, this realization prompted the organization of a national housing agency that would build much-needed social housing aimed directly at young households (Amann, Bejan, and Mundt 2012). These were not necessarily poor households, but households that were considered capable of shouldering the rents. The GFC, however, put an end even to these meager efforts, and instead, measures reinforcing the homeownership-biased system were put in place, this time with a neoliberal financialized twist. The "First Home" mortgage guarantee program in Romania depends on the government essentially subsidizing banks to give affordable mortgages to people who want to buy homes. Similar measures, intended to reinforce neoliberal capitalism, were put in place in other countries in the region, but not all, following the GFC (see Bohle 2014 for a discussion of post-GFC policies in Estonia and Hungary).

This lack of awareness of the importance of housing went hand in hand with a dismissal of claims to housing rights particularly coming from disadvantaged groups. Housing became a merit good in political discourses instead of a right, one that would have to be earned following a career. Meanwhile, housing adequacy, affordability, and accessibility problems have become ever more pressing. In what

follows we will highlight some of these problems as evidenced by cross-national statistical data, and we will discuss the work of zombie socialism in furthering social dumping.

The privatization process that affected housing units themselves was followed by the devolution and, in some cases, privatization of state utility companies that serviced residential buildings. The elimination of central government subsidies for utilities and the liberalization of fuel prices resulted in skyrocketing utility costs that crippled the ability of newly minted homeowners to sustain their status (Buzar 2007; Fearn 2004). Despite widespread homeownership, which could in principle be associated with increased asset security, rising utility costs severely impeded the ability of outright homeowners to maintain themselves as owners, let alone benefit from the quality of life usually associated with homeownership (Mandic 2010). In 2011, more than 20% of the populations of Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Latvia reported arrears on utility bills, far above the EU average of 15% (13% in the EU 15) (EQLS 2012). The effects of these measures fell disproportionately on poor jurisdictions, since the more affluent areas were capable of continuing to partially subsidize utilities, while poorer ones shifted responsibility directly onto consumers (Table 1).

A direct result of rising utility costs in the region has been the increase in energy poverty, particularly among poor households. According to data from Eurostat (2014), nearly 47% of households in Bulgaria, 34% of those in Lithuania, 20% of those in Latvia, and about 15% of households in Hungary, Romania, and Poland are not able to keep their homes adequately warm. As opposed to Western European countries, where energy poverty is a combination of low-income and low-energy efficiency of buildings, in Central and Eastern Europe this has combined with the increase in fuel prices prompted by unfettered price liberalization after the fall of state socialism (Bouzarovski 2013). The lack of an adequate social safety net that could shelter income-poor households from energy price increases is yet another symptom in the systematic trend of shifting responsibilities away from the welfare state and onto individuals and households, while at the same time dismissing social claims from poor and disadvantaged groups.

Giveaway privatization and the creation of a class of poor homeowners (Fearn 2004) in the region have not fundamentally altered the relationship between the state – as the institution mainly responsible for capital investments in the built environment – and homeowners. The absence of coherent housing policies and, one may argue, the absence of housing policies at all, has impeded both the delivery of social services through housing and structural investments in housing stocks. This has resulted in the continuous deterioration of socialist-era housing and a rise in housing deprivation, especially among income-poor households, those who acquired the poorest quality housing in the privatization process. Meanwhile, a lack of building standards to control speculative building in cities and over reliance on self-help building in rural and suburban areas has led to the proliferation of substandard housing among newly built units as well (Soaita 2012, 2013). Severe

Table 1. Housing conditions in Central and Eastern European countries (percent).

Country	Own outright	Own with mortgage	Utility Arrears	Energy poverty	Housing deprivation (disrepair)	Housing Depri-vation (indoor toilet)	Overcrowding (in cities)	People aged 25–34 living with parents	Housing cost overburden (in cities)
Bulgaria	86.7	2.5	23	46.5	13.2	20.6	50.5	50.5	11.8
Czech Republic	54.8	11.2	13	6.7	9.2	0.7	23.9	33.2	14.8
Estonia	63.1	12.8	9	4.2	15.9	7.2	16.1	21.1	10.3
Croatia	75.8	12.2	27	9.7	11.7	2	41.6	58.9	7.3
Hungary	70.6	21.5	25	14.5	26.9	5.3	37.7	42.7	13.2
Lithuania	83.5	5.6	9	34.1	18.9	12.5	32.5	31.1	9.2
Latvia	62.4	11.7	22	19.9	27.5	14.7	39.6	32.3	10
Poland	74.9	3.7	24	13.2	9.2	3.1	43.7	43.5	10.9
Romania	86.2	2.1	21	14.6	12.7	33.3	54	46.2	12.5
Slovenia	83.1	6.5	11	6.1	29.9	0.6	17.5	43	9.9
Slovakia	72.7	16.5	12	5.5	7	1.3	39.5	57.1	10.8
EU average	44.7	20.7	15	10.8	15.7	2.6	18.2	28.2	13.1

Note: Green and pink cells highlight percentages that are higher and lower than the EU average, respectively.
Source: Eurostat 2014 (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database); European Quality of Life Survey 2012 (http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-quality-of-life-surveys).

housing deprivation in the region far exceeds European averages, particularly for households with incomes below 60% of the median (Pittini et al. 2016).

Access to owner occupation is severely restricted due to the underdeveloped, and at times outright predatory, mortgage practices that remained unregulated by governments, particularly in countries in Southeastern Europe. The mortgage sector in Romania, for example, developed in the early 2000s and remained dependent on foreign bank capital until the financial crisis, a situation similar in other CEE countries. The sector has been periodically plagued by scandals, and public wariness of getting into mortgage debt pushes people to opt for informal channels to finance home purchase (Druţă and Ronald, forthcoming). In 2009, representative interest rates on mortgage loans in Romania were 7.16%, higher only in Hungary, 11.55%, Bulgaria, 10.09%, and Poland 7.26% (EMF 2015). Historically low interest rates following the GFC remained higher in these countries compared to Western European counterparts. Interest rates in 2014 were 8.48% in Hungary, 6.66% in Bulgaria, 5.05% in Croatia, 4.68% in Romania, and 4.10% in Poland compared to 2.53% in Germany or 2.73% in France (EMF 2015). Nevertheless, some countries in the region, like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Slovenia did converge toward European averages.

Unable to access owner-occupied housing and form autonomous households through their own efforts, young households in post-socialist societies remain highly dependent on the resources that parents have acquired in the post-socialist privatization (Mandic 2008; Roberts 2003). Gifting of property or *in vivo* inheritance, financial transfers covering a substantial amount of the value of a property, bank guarantees, and mortgage installment payments are common forms by which older generations support their adult children, especially among the middle classes (Druţă and Ronald, forthcoming). For those parents who were not able to secure sufficient assets, however, multigenerational living in overcrowded apartments is the only way to provide for their offspring. Data from Eurostat (2014) suggest that among urban dwellers, 54% of Romanians, 50% of Bulgarians, over 40% of Croatians and Poles, and over 35% of Latvians, Hungarians, and Slovakians live in overcrowded households.[10]

Meanwhile, among young people aged 25–34, 58% in Croatia, 57% in Slovakia, 50% in Bulgaria, and over 40% in Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia continue to live in parental homes (Eurostat 2014). Particularly, in continental Western European countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany), more balanced housing systems in which publicly provided or non-profit housing were more readily available, and the private rental sector was more tightly regulated, enabled the early emancipation of young adults. These systems, smoothing intergenerational inequalities through state intervention, have come under increasing stress throughout Europe due to welfare state retrenchment policies (Arundel and Ronald 2016). The privatization of social housing and gradual change in the mandates of housing associations are reducing the scope of the social housing sector, while increasingly young populations are dependent on private rental (Lennartz, Arundel, and Ronald 2015).

However, the dismantling of the state housing monopolies and the equation of publicly provided housing with undeserved state handovers have decimated these systems, in particular in Southeastern Europe.

For example, as of 2011 the share of social/state housing in the CEE region remained extremely low: 2% in Croatia and Romania; 3% in Slovakia; 4% in Estonia, Hungary, and Slovenia; 8% in the Czech Republic; 10% in Poland; and 16% in Russia (Lux and Sunega 2014, 507). In some countries, for instance Romania, the private rented sector in urban areas, continues to function in a gray area, dependent on individual landlords, unscrutinized with regard to quality, with contracts only rarely registered with the designated authorities, and offering very little security of tenure (Bejan, Botonogu, and Armasu 2014). Some countries in the CEE have fared better than others, and maintain, for example, structures for the provision of cooperative housing (Poland, Czech Republic).

The above litany of housing problems would suggest immediate and sweeping action, from central as well as local governments. However, housing and social policies in many countries in the region usually turn a blind eye to these problems. The financing of new social housing continues to be problematic, particularly in countries in which it is dependent on resources available to local municipalities. Even in countries like Romania or Slovakia where national social housing programs are in place, public budgets for housing construction are constantly facing cuts (Amann et al. 2012). Meanwhile, requests for social housing from vulnerable groups are ignored or refused. There is no social housing to allocate.

Conclusions

In this article, we sought to contribute to the ongoing debate on whether "post-socialism" still makes sense as an analytic category in Central and Eastern Europe. We think that it sometimes does, but sometimes does not. Our discussion indicates that it does make sense to speak of socialism (and its post) as an absence – a negative entity – that still produces effects. We have focused less on the rescaling of comparative strategies or the rescaling of geographic categories. Rather, we emphasized the extent to which the ghost of socialism (and its post-socialist extensions) has managed to function as an enabler of policies maintaining low wages, reduced social spending, and diminished state involvement in domains such as housing. The obsessive references to the socialist past have had constitutive powers, creating a particularly strong version of neoliberalism. Zombie socialism arguments have become a convenient and strategic ideological device for furthering social dumping, increasing inequalities, and reducing support for redistributive policies. In this sense, in its post-1989 negation, socialism continues to be extremely relevant: the usage of spectral and mythological representations of socialism has, for the winners of transition, the capacity to preempt social justice claims and to structure political relations in the allocation of wealth.

The article proposed the idea of zombie socialism as an analytical concept for understanding experiences of actually existing neoliberal capitalisms (Brenner and Theodore 2002) in Central and Eastern European countries. As well as defining the concept and its dimensions, the article offered examples of how the rhetoric of zombie socialism is constructed in political discourses in the region and documented, with respect to a number of social policy domains, what the potential effects of zombie socialism may be. The analysis, however, did not point to episodes of usage of zombie socialist discourse in specific policy-making processes. Though arguably these exist, tracing these connections in any direct form is difficult without access to backstage conversations of politicians. What we documented in this article is one particular role of the socialist past – that of boogeyman/spectral figure meant to discipline the population along neoliberal ideological tenets.

Our discussion of the uses of zombie socialism and data analysis has several potential implications. First, scholars sensitive to the local dynamics should be skeptical and eschew language of "transition," "reform," and the like. As Horvat and Štiks (2012) argue, there is nothing to transit further toward any longer. One may say that some of these countries have so much "transitioned" to capitalist market economies that they embraced market-fundamentalist ideas that may seem extreme in countries with a longer capitalist tradition in Western Europe or the United States (Duijzings 2010, 109; Smith and Rachovská 2007, 1163). Further use of concepts that evoke "incompleteness" and "catching up" are likely to mask additional transfers of economic burden on employees, households, and lower classes. Despite difficulties in positioning these countries in area studies taxonomy (Gilbert et al. 2008), it might be more emancipatory for the populations of these countries to accept them as "fully transitioned" and thus be in a better position to resist the fallacies of zombie socialism.

Second, one may speculate on the potential of these countries to become Europe's "other" once more, but this time in a new sense, as the poster children of neoliberalism. The story of the flat tax, to which we alluded, with its potential to travel back to the metropole, is a good example of how the region may send back "on steroids" some of the neoliberal wisdom and the phobia of the (welfare) state that it received. Just as the cold war and the fear of Soviet socialism had constitutive effects on expanding social welfare and increased state intervention in Western European economies during the cold war (Verdery 2001, 19; see also, Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 317), the emergence of a neoliberal belt in Central and Eastern Europe might have transformative effects on the constitution of welfare systems in Western societies. Note the rise of pride in the CEE region around the idea of the "New Europe," the unapologetic embrace of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and arguments by immigrants from ex-socialist countries that West Europeans work too little compared to them. It may also have an effect on other parts of the world, as the neoliberal technocratic elites originating in CEE seem to have a special pedagogic appetite to share their experience in other countries that enter the neoliberal labyrinth.

Third, we wonder what the chances are that the concept of post-socialism (understood differently than a temporal container that is replaceable with other temporal delineators) will travel to other geographical areas (Tuvikene 2016). Although we, like others, are sympathetic to this possibility, there is little evidence of that happening (Pitcher and Askew 2006, 2, 3). If, for three decades post-socialism has not traveled outside of CEE and the FSU, we do not see it being applied elsewhere productively and substantively in the future. There is little evidence that scholars of and from Cuba, Vietnam, Zambia, and Tanzania use research on post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe in order to understand their post-cold war conditions. Such countries belonged to the periphery of socialism then and they will belong, if at all, to the conceptual periphery of post-socialism (see Pitcher and Askew [2006, 2] on this point). As unappealing as it may be, when it comes to post-socialism, area studies themes seem to predominate over innovative cross-fertilization of different geographic regions. It is increasingly acknowledged that some concepts and theories in urbanism that have been developed around Western experiences have the capacity to pass as universal, rendering the rest "local" (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 315). So too, as post-socialism has been developed in relation to Central and Eastern Europe, it is hard to believe that it will have the power to pass for a universal concept rendering European or African experiences as local. Instead, its role is important for documenting how the circulation of power, people, capital, ideas, and commodities in, out and through Central and Eastern Europe, reshapes the rest of world.

Notes

1. FIDESZ is the main conservative party in Hungary and has dominated Hungarian politics since its landslide victory in 2010. Prime Minister Victor Orban is its main spokes person. *Magyar Hírlap* is one of the main outlets for conservative and traditional values in Hungary. http://hun.politika.narkive.com/6JEFhroi/lumpenproli-panelproli.
2. Traian Basescu's housing practices were the opposite of his philosophy. He is currently charged with money laundering through real estate transfers and the illegal self-allocation of state housing, while he was a mayor of Bucharest in the early 2000s.
3. Super-homeownership is actually not a communist-era process, but strictly a post-1991 phenomena, the year the state housing privatization legislation passed.
4. http://www.cadi.ro/index.php/vizualizare/articol/multimedia/382
5. We thank Matthias Bernt for pointing out this situation.
6. Melania Trump has been in the U.S. almost half of her life (since 1996, according to https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/26/donald-trump-melania-trump-first-lady).
7. As Ost (2015, 614) nicely noticed, "the only group unproblematically labeled a class" in these countries.
8. For instance, he declared that he has voted for the anti-communist presidential candidates, thus against the candidates of his Social Democratic Party, which gathered, in the 1990s and 2000s, many second- and third-tier *nomenklatura* and socialist-era technical *intelligentia*.

9. The boomerang effect, according to Foucault ([1975–1976] 2003), occurs in situations when military, administrative, and political technologies that European colonial states transported to the colonies were later used on these European populations themselves. A good illustration is the slippage between Baghdad and Hurricane Katrina's New Orleans in the way militarization and containment of "suspicious" groups proceeded (see Graham 2009, 285). Similarly, drones – initially used in wars overseas – are increasingly used to control crime in cities in the U.S. (see http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/how-are-drones-used-in-us/).
10. Eurostat measures overcrowding in the following manner: A person is considered living in overcrowded conditions if the household does not have at its disposal a minimum number of rooms equal to one room for the household; one room per couple in the household; one room for each single person aged 18 or more; one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17 years of age; one room for each single person between 12 and 17 years of age and not included in the previous category; one room per pair of children under 12 years of age.

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